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Men of 'True Grit' Manned CIA Vessel

Roughnecks, Drinkers Were Recruited for Patriotism, Expertise

Good old country boys from Dixie, two-fisted drinkers and oil roughnecks, all "men of good true grit," were recruited for their reliability, expertise and patriotism to man the CIA ship Glomar Explorer on its cloak-and-dagger mission.

Curley, Cowboy, Bimbo and Big John were some of the nicknames of men selected from Alabama, Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi—men familiar with drilling rigs and ships, men who wore their patriotism on their sleeves.

They were from towns like Houston and Floresville, Bridge City and Pasadena in Texas; Brookhaven, Miss.; Slidell, Vivian and Shreveport, La.; Millry, Ala. and Little Rock, Ark.

"We were looking for a certain type of man," said a source familiar with CIA hiring procedures.

"He had to have a clearable background. You can't imagine how many men turned up with eight or ten arrests on their records and had to be turned away.

"The man the CIA wanted didn't have extreme intelligence or book-learning, but he did have a great sense of loyalty to his country and his family.

"He was patriotic, loyal, flag-saluting, apple-pie eatin', mother-lovin', tobacco-chewing and he swallowed the tobacco juice!

"He was an expert in what he did, a pipe handler or crane operator. And he knew how to stay quiet. Lots of these old boys don't have much to say anyway," he added.

"You can bet a lot of them didn't come in wearing suits. Somebody in a fancy suit might get thrown out.

"These were tough old boys who could get drunk and fight like a bear."

A few of them did mix it up during a party last April when 25 or so crew members gathered on the eve of the beginning of a class at Redwood City.

The CIA had provided about \$80 worth of liquor to a "den mother" whose responsibility was to look after the men's needs.

"We all got together, but nobody talked about the Russian sub. They just talked like all the oilfield roughnecks always talk—about how much casing they had laid, how much they earned an hour in Alaska or the Gulf of Mexico, the deepest holes they had drilled," he said.

Despite their hard drinking and hard talking, however, the roughneck Explorer crew turned out to be well-behaved, according to the source.

During the entire training period of a couple of months, only one of them was arrested and jailed—on a drunk charge, he said.

They all had been briefed about what to do in such an instance, and many places had been marked off-limits.

Few if any of them forgot they were there to attend classes.

"I remember Big John sitting in a classroom at Redwood City where we were studying up on the Geneva Convention Treaty. That was so we would know what to do if the Russians decided to come aboard the Explorer.

"And Big John sitting there memorizing some part of the Geneva Convention Treaty and kidding and saying, 'I'll just knock the hell out of any of them Russians who sets his foot on the ship!'

"Of course, we were told not anything like that was to be done and Big John knew it," the source related.

"All these men who met the CIA people had nothing but the highest respect for them. The CIA guys knew their jobs.

"They all signed documents pledging themselves to secrecy, and that's hanging over every goddamned one of us right today," he added.

The crew members hired for the mission were given 18-month contracts, which included bonuses of \$150 monthly.

But they knew the CIA treated everyone very well, and they are still hoping they will get bonuses of \$5,000 to \$10,000.

According to a crew member who made the July, 1974, trip to retrieve the sunken Soviet sub, living quarters on the Explorer were "spacious" and air-conditioned.

Like all offshore drilling rigs or drill ships, there was a well-paid "utility crew" to clean up the bathrooms, make the beds, mop floors and straighten up the day room.

The crew member who was aboard the Explorer said steak and lobster was plentiful and that he ate some things "that had names I never heard before."

There also were big bowls of fresh fruit, and candy was always available to the men.

There has been some contention from other sources that all was not so comfortable aboard the Explorer, at least on her maiden voyage from an East Coast shipyard to Long Beach.

Global Marine, which operated the ship for the CIA, was charged by the National Labor Relations Board in March

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with violating federal labor laws by hiring union members who sought union representation.

The men were fired in the fall of 1964. Global Marine has said it intends to appeal the ruling.

In seeing that the crew members were well treated, one man was delegated to act as a sort of "den mother," according to the source.

"He saw about motel reservations and rooms and all sorts of things like that. In his room he always kept a couple cases of whisky and beer. If the boys wanted a couple drinks at night, the den mother had it all there.

These men considered it an honor to be selected when they found out what we were going to do," said a source who knew most of the 140-man crew.

Meanwhile, the CIA is keeping in constant contact with the crew members during the time the ship is docked at Long Beach.

Just three weeks ago an agent dropped into a large Southern city for a meeting with an employee of the Glomar Explorer venture.

"They wanted to let us know they were around," the source said of his meeting with a young CIA agent.

"They wanted to let us know there are future projects coming up. Sometimes it seems they want to remind you that when you get hooked up with a project like this (with the CIA), sometimes you can't ever get untangled from it or them.

"But they also want to pat you on the back. They're good at that. They tell you 'Don't worry. We're standing right behind you.' And, don't you know, it makes you feel fighting good!

They want to tell you a lot of reporters may come knocking on your door and that we should stay quiet. They're real nice about it, but I know they keep track of everyone.

"Some of 'em have told me maybe one of those reporters isn't a reporter, maybe he's a Russian agent," he said.

"They're worried, too, that someone may try to sell their story."

The crew members attended classes with eight to 10 men in a class. The basic courses consisted of elementary nuclear studies (because the Soviet ship would be contaminated by the nuclear warheads it carried), submarine design and the Russian alphabet.

The men learned that alphabet so they might recognize letters on various items aboard the Soviet submarine and then relay them through a communications system connecting them to two Russian language experts.

"I remember looking around and here's this old boy from Alabama, trying to talk Russian or pronounce the letters," a source said.

"But listen—remember this—there was no bull in these courses. I mean there was hard work.

"Still, I recall those tin cans on the floor. Five or six of them that the men used to spit in tobacco juice. It seemed kind of funny to me then and even funnier now."

The CIA used little advertising to attract men to the job. Rather, the intelligence agency men knew enough to realize that word would spread about the Explorer and its ostensible mission to draw off valuable mineral deposits from the ocean bottom.

They offered good money and adventure. And the adventure of being associated with Howard Hughes, the most mysterious man of all.

"We were hired, many of us, out of the fifth floor of the Tishman Bldg. at 5639 Century Blvd. in Los Angeles," said the source.

There was a picture of the Glomar Explorer on the wall (in the interview room) and part of the pitch to the new employees was that Hughes had recently located a fantastic mineral deposit in the Pacific.

"Most of the time the response was something like 'We've heard a lot about this ship.'"

It seems like everyone had heard about this ship, and strange and different ship. Nobody was sure what it was going to do something. They just knew there was some kind of vacuum apparatus that was going to suck up the nodules from the ocean floor," he said.

There always was a plentiful supply of nodules, as a constant reminder to the employees about the purpose of the project.

The Seascope, another Global Marine ship, had picked them up from the ocean bottom. Often the men sitting across from the CIA agent doing the hiring saw a nodule or two lying on the desk or on a nearby filing cabinet.

Sixteen divers were hired for the mission, and when it was learned that so many divers were sought a lot of questions were raised.

Why were so many divers needed if the vacuum sweeper under the ship was going to suck up the mineral nodules?

The prospective employees first met a CIA contract man who did the initial interviews in the Tishman Building.

In a room adjacent to his was a CIA man known as Howard Imamura, about 49, who was the ostensible assistant but who actually decided on whether a man was a good enough prospect to undergo the clearance procedures.

"Clearance took about three months for each man," said the source. "If a man got that far we would have him sign a contract saying he would be paid \$25 a month (during the security check if it took longer than three months you almost could be sure he wasn't going to make it.

"The men looking for jobs were told they would be working for Howard Hughes and that Howard Hughes is a strange man and not to be alarmed if someone came into their neighborhoods and asked about them," he said.

"They were . . . paid the retainer of \$25 a month so they couldn't file a suit for invasion of privacy.

"I heard it made hiring one helluva job because these men never knew how long it would take to hire them, and should they quit their jobs or not. They'd keep telephoning, asking how about the job. Somebody kept telling them just wait a couple days and call back.

"The CIA man next door to the first interviewer would ask them a lot, like did they ever use drugs. One young man who said he smoked a lot of marijuana cigarettes was hired anyway because someone pulled some strings for him and he worked out fine.

"Nobody was hired who had ever belonged to a union because we didn't want union trouble. Sometimes we advertised for specialized experts, but most all the men came because they had heard about the job by word of mouth. In fact I heard 95% of the men who called in were not hired.

"No Jews were hired because of some possible involvement with Israel. No one from the Scripps Institute because it had been involved in some of kind of government work.

"A lot of these men were told the information on their background was needed for visa details," he added.

One employee, musing about his experiences, said:

"Sometimes I would look around and see average people and I would wonder, 'Why can't I be like that?'"

Riding late at night in his car, smoking cigaret after cigaret, on the streets of a large Southern city where he now lives temporarily, he wonders about it all. He is pretty sure life will never be the same.

—NICHOLAS C. CHRISS